

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Episode 55 Transcript
“Embracing Our Roots, Forging Our Future: Marianist Gatherings in 2026”

00:00 – Rob Brodrick

The first assembly that I went to was the reason that I'm still in the Marianist Family because that was the first time that I really encountered so many people in different spaces. And I realized that this thing that was in my heart, that was really burning with where I lived and the way that I was trying to live this charism, was matched in the energy and in the commitment level by so many people across the entire country. And I said, “Wow, this is really something that I want to be a part of. This is something that I want to learn more about. This is something that I want to really invest myself into in a more substantive way.”

00:36 – Mike Bennett

As Rob Roderick just shared, that burning heart for the Marianist charism often finds its spark when the whole Family gathers. This year that spark is set to grow as our Marianist Family prepares for a year of monumental gatherings. In this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, we're going behind the scenes of five major gatherings that will shape the future of our mission. To kick us off, we're joined by Sr. Laura Leming, who represents the Marianist Family Council of North America, which consists of two members of unit leadership from each of the three branches of the Marianist Family in the United States: the Society of Mary, Marianist Sisters, and Lay Marianists. Sr. Laura shares about the Marianist Family Congress, a long-awaited meeting of the minds where Marianist Brothers, Priests, Sisters, and Lay Marianists from across the United States and Canada will come together on the weekend of April 17th to 19th, 2026 to envision the future of the Marianist Family in North America. She begins by sharing a memory that includes longtime Marianist leaders, Joan and AJ Wagner.

01:43 – Sr. Laura Leming, FMI

I remember at least 15 years ago sitting in AJ and Joan Wagner's dining room with the North American Family Council on a Friday night. And we started talking about if we could have a gathering of all three branches where there is real envisioning and goal setting. So, it's been a long time coming. The idea keeps coming back to the North American Family of Mary Council, and we got more serious about doing this about three or four years ago when we did invite a task force to explore what a Congress could or should be. That group produced a proposal to us, and we said, “We're going to go ahead and do this. We're going to find the resources to pull representatives from all three branches in North America together to explore what is the impact that the whole Marianist Family can have together in our North American culture, society, and our Church. And that's my hope that we can have this meeting of lay and vowed Marianist minds. We have done a lot of work to get a fairly wide representation. So, there are SMs and FMIs there, and a larger group of Lay Marianists because the Lay Marianists are the larger group, from Hawaii all the way to New Jersey.

03:18 – Sr. Laura Leming, FMI

The North American Family of Mary Council explicitly said, “We'd like to have both our seasoned members, but also emerging voices.” So, some of the younger Lay Marianists who are beginning to take some leadership and ownership of the Marianist Family. So, we've tried really hard to put together a group of people who are passionate about the Marianist Family. We had, I think it was something like 127 people participate in focus groups that the planning group conducted. So, we gathered a lot of information about what people's hopes are for the

Marianist Family in our own day and time. A smaller group of about 60 will be at the Congress.

04:03 – Sr. Laura Leming, FMI

There's so many things that we could benefit from as we continue to rediscover some of the amazing work that's been done by Marianists in the past hundred years. So, it's not just a celebration of what we've done in the past, but how do we move forward? If a visitor peeked into our assembly, I hope that they would really have a sense that we are engaged in a synodal process, that we are people walking together and walking forward, not just looking back. We're not celebrating where we are. Those are good, too. But how do we walk forward together? What is needed by the Church, by the world, by our local communities from us as Marianists? If we're serious about living the Marianist charism, it's a gift for the Church in the world, and we need to be giving that gift.

05:04 – Mike Bennett

Finish this sentence: "To me, being a part of this gathering means..."

05:09 – Sr. Laura Leming, FMI

"... Seeing a dream and an idea that I have been part of come into fruition, and to see the Marianist Family take a couple steps forward in sharing the great gift that we have with the Church."

05:26 – Mike Bennett

Looking forward together is essential, but as Sr. Laura noted, we also stand alongside those who have long tenures in the Marianist Family. In May 2026, one group will return to a place many call home: Dayton, Ohio. To tell us about Common Bond, an organization of former members of the Society of Mary and their upcoming reunion, we welcome Jim Martin.

05:49 – Jim Martin

Common Bond is an organization comprised of former members of the Society of Mary. We have maintained relationships with current members. And also, spouses and significant others of the Common Bond membership are members as well. There are approximately 500 members. Traditionally, we hold a reunion every three years. That was interrupted a bit by COVID. Our last reunion was in 2021 in San Antonio, Texas. So this year, we're happy to say that we are gathering once again at Bergamo on the Mount St. John campus, which is very dear to many of our hearts because many of the members who belonged to the Cincinnati and New York Provinces of happy memory spent years on the Mount St. John campus while they were attending the University of Dayton. In fact, there's a few of us, such as myself, who helped build Bergamo.

06:47 – Jim Martin

As you might imagine, we are getting a little old. About 90% of our membership is 75 years of age or older. And besides just the good fellowship and wanting to renew our friendships, we're also going to discuss the future of Common Bond and how the membership would like to see organization evolve. One of the key themes of the reunion is wanting to share our stories and share where we've been in order to help us move forward. Because sharing our accomplishments and the things we're proudest of gives us a way of connecting and helping us move forward. I have a real deep feeling that pathways will be open to our membership to find other connections in the Family of Mary.

07:32 – Mike Bennett

Finish this sentence: “To me, being a part of this gathering means...”

07:37 – Jim Martin

“... Means joy, happiness, renewing good friendships.”

07:43 – Mike Bennett

While Common Bond celebrates the lifelong friendships of those who served in the Society, the Brothers and Priests of the US Province of the Society of Mary are also preparing for their own milestone this summer. Returning to their roots in Dayton this June, their assembly is focused on a theme of “Embracing Our Roots, Forging Our Future.” Here is Fr. John Thompson, co-chair of the Assembly to explain why this year's gathering is looking to be a historic, interactive experience.

08:11 – Fr. John Thompson, SM

Every formal Province used to gather together periodically, and once we became the US Province in 2002, we've been gathering every time there's a new leadership, so every five years and every three years. Other assemblies focused on putting together a strategic plan. So, it was a much more working kind of experience. Some have just been opportunities for us to be inspired by things that are going on. So, each assembly has taken [a] different kind of format. This one in particular is timely, because this is the first time we're having [an] assembly in Dayton, and looking at place has had an influence on what we're going to be talking about. So, our theme this year is “Embracing Our Roots, Forging Our Future.” So, going back to when we started in 1849, honoring our past, and looking to our future. Typically, in all of our assemblies, we have invited guests, and they've been handpicked to accompany us. This particular assembly is going to be a little bit more interactive with members from the Sisters and from the Lay communities. In particular, we've invited four young adults from each of our universities.

09:25 – Mike Bennett

With a new provincial council being installed this summer, how does this assembly balance our heritage with the courageous “Yes” needed for the future of religious life?

09:37 – Fr. John Thompson, SM

Well, anyone accepting the call to leadership has got to be courageous at this point. So, we're going to pray for these men, that they will have the courage to lead us into the future. I don't think Father Chaminade ever dreamed of the Society of Mary outside of Bordeaux and France. So, his dream became bigger than what he originally thought about. I like to think about that, too, about ourselves in the US, that we have a dream, but it can be bigger than what any of us expected. Because of circumstances, because of being open to the Spirit, because of being in the right place at the right time. Looking at our new leaders, they will have some decisions that they will have to make in conjunction with the Brothers, but also in collaboration with the larger Marianist Family. We need to be open to other ideas that we haven't thought about. So, I think our leaders really have to be more attentive to the voices of the Laity and to the voices of the Sisters so that we're making an impact as the Marianist Family.

10:39 – Mike Bennett

I'm curious, what impacts [do] you foresee this assembly having on the Marianist Family as a whole?

10:44 – Fr. John Thompson, SM

One of the hopes is to be able to articulate how each branch participates in the promotion of the mission, and how we need one another to further promote the mission. And so, then, to provide that opportunity between the branches to say, “This is important for us to think more of.” *We* and not *I*.

11:07 – Mike Bennett

If someone were to peek through the door of the assembly, what's one thing you think they would see or feel?

11:14 – Fr. John Thompson, SM

They'll hear a lot of laughter. They'll see how the Brothers interact with one another and can joke with one another. They'll see how the Brothers will be together at prayer and how important that is for our life and for our mission. They'll see how the Brothers listen to one another and offer and engage. They'll see this is a community that is living their life together. And they will see how the Brothers are able to work with other people outside of the Society of Mary and embrace them and welcome them to their tables and really care deeply about what they're doing. To me, being part of this gathering means being part of a historic moment in the life of the Society of Mary in the United States in the year 2026.

12:01 – Mike Bennett

That spirit of collaboration between the branches is a perfect lead into our next event. As the summer heat picks up in July, the Marianist Lay Community of North America, MLC-NA, will be heading to Louisville, Kentucky. This assembly is known for its high energy and family-friendly atmosphere. Joining us again is Rob Brodrick, National Director for MLC-NA, to talk about their theme, “Building Community with Mary,” and a very special keynote speaker who will nourish the way we think about the role of Mary in our personal and communal lives.

12:34 – Rob Brodrick

This assembly comes once every three years, so we're really excited that it's coming up. It's really a great assembly put on by the lay branch of the Marianist Family. One of the things that's unique about our assembly is that it features all sorts of members from the Marianist Family. So, you're going to see a really great contingent of Marianist Sisters, Marianist Brothers and Priests there. You're going to see a lot of our great collaborators in the Marianist Family who work at all of our wonderful ministries, our schools, our universities, our retreat centers, our justice-based programs. So, really, everyone kind of comes together at this assembly.

13:05 – Rob Brodrick

This year, our theme is “Building Community with Mary,” and so there's really two parts of that theme. One is the Marian aspect of what it means to be Marianist, and the other is the communal aspect, and we're really looking at how those things go together. The reason we're really focusing on this theme this year is because we're making a bigger push than ever to build up more Marianist Lay Communities and be able to live our mission of community-building in the Church and world more effectively. Besides their function of getting everyone together and being centers of energy, these assemblies also serve as really good opportunities for us to collectively think through various aspects of our charism. So, because we are going into this stage where we are building more MLCs each and every year than we ever have in

the past, this is a really good opportunity for us to stop and to think about how are we doing that. How can we do that better, to remind ourselves of what it's all about? And of course, for us as Marianists, that goes back not only just to our founders, but also to the woman for whom we are all named, and to go back to Mary.

14:14 – Rob Brodrick

Our keynote speaker for this assembly is Professor Natalia Imperatori-Lee, and she's joining us from Fordham University in the Bronx. Professor Imperatori-Lee really has a very large breadth of work, all of which is appropriate to the Marianist Family. Some of her work is on small faith communities, how they organize, how they present themselves. As we see changing demographics in the Church and what that looks like, one of the big things that she thinks about is how all of that relates to the way that we look at Mary. Mary touches everything in the Church, sort of touches everything in theology at some point in time. And when we have different ideas of who Mary of Nazareth was, and we start presenting her in different ways, those map almost directly onto the different ways in which we organize ourselves in terms of our community structure, in terms of how we relate to each other socially, what different ethnic populations – especially including the Hispanic community – look like, what this means regarding the role of women in the Church, and how all of those things are embodied in our thought about Mary. She's a really rich, really wonderful presenter, and I think [she is] going to unpack a lot of these themes in ways that give Marianists a very rich vocabulary to talk about what we all tend to feel in our hearts and can't always express in the same kind of theological language or with the same insight that Natalia has from her many years of research in this field.

15:38 – Rob Brodrick

Our content is really special because we have 12 different workshops that are put on by all sorts of people in the Marianist Family. Many of these workshops are collaborative. You'll not only get to hear about the great work that they're doing, but we've also encouraged them to really think about their theme and leave something to take home with you. So, you can take what's happening in other parts of the Marianist Family, learn from that, and then say, "How is that going to change the way that maybe I think about my local community?" That's really what it's all about.

16:07 – Rob Brodrick

One of the things that I think surprises the people most about our assembly is how energetic and family-oriented [it is], both in terms of the fact that the Marianist Family really is a family. We get people together and they're like, "Oh my goodness, I haven't seen you. Oh, I have never met you before, and I'm instantly excited." And also, the fact that we have little kids running around. There is childcare programming that we're very happy to have there, so people are bringing their little ones. We've had people walk in and say, "I thought this was going to be more of a stiff corporate event where I just go and I listen to presenters and then I go back to my room." People love our presenters, get a great amount of information from that, and then immediately go talk to one another and say, "How can we put that back in this?" And "I'm so excited, and I'm thinking about this and can't wait to go back and get together and talk about all of that content." To me, being part of this gathering means being part of the most exciting space in our Church that is rapidly growing, that is doing new and exciting things, that is welcoming new people in, that is advancing the work of social justice, that is advancing the impact that we have on so many people who really need the structures of community in their life.

17:25 – Mike Bennett

To wrap up our preview of this abundant year, we're looking toward Bogotá, Columbia, where the International Lay Assembly will take place in August. Representatives from around the globe will set the course for Lay Marianists for the next four years. Here to share more about this important gathering is Matt Dunn, the International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities regional [head] responsible for North America, Australia, and Ireland.

17:52 – Matt Dunn

The International Assembly is really the Lay equivalent of the General Chapters held by the Brothers and the Sisters. It is held every four years in a different part of the world, and it's a place where the priorities for the lay branch get established. Community is built and experienced around the world. International officers are elected. Documents can be written. Sometimes they're presented and approved, or both. A lot of our foundational documents were written at assemblies. All of the business and governance decisions of the Marianist Lay Communities must take place at an assembly and be voted upon by delegates on behalf of Lay Marianists around the world. The assembly is attended by delegates identified by the countries sending them, each country where there's a Marianist Lay community has one slot. And then, some countries have additional delegates that they can send based on the number of Lay Marianists in any country. There's a certain number of delegates to represent a certain number of people. So, we're expecting about 60 people in Bogotá. We also have observers who attend, so anybody could attend on their own dime. And we also include the superiors of the other branches who attend as guests. The chair of MLC-NA will be attending. And then, delegates -who] were identified by MLC-NA's leadership team to represent diverse ages and geographies. We have four delegates, and we are sending a young adult.

19:25 – Matt Dunn

Being a delegate is a two-way responsibility. We want people to bring their experience to share with others, and we also want them to take the experience back to their country, thereby creating unity amid our diversity and an opportunity to scale our impact through common activities and priorities. It also helps us realize we're part of something larger than our own personal or local experience, and that we have a responsibility to meet shared expectations that all Lay Marianists should have around the world. A survey conducted by the International Organization in 2025 sought to learn more about Lay Marianists around the world. Respondents answered questions about their own personal faith experience, their community experience, and their experience of the Marianist Family. The days of the assembly are divided among those themes, and the results of the survey will be shared relevant to each of those themes.

20:20 – Matt Dunn

For each specific day, there'll be some dialogue, and opportunities for delegates to interact, learn from each other's experiences around those themes. Our business items take place at the assembly. So, we'll be voting on officers, and a document that we're going to approve at this assembly is an update to our statutes. The International Lay Organization filed its "Articles of Incorporation," for lack of a better word, and statutes with the Vatican back in 2000. Even though we are the branch that was founded first – Father Chaminade founding a Sodality with Lay people – Lay Communities were sort of rebirthed about 50 or 60 years ago. So, we're growing and learning about the opportunities and the responsibility that we have as Laity to be active in the Church and to carry the Marianist charism forward.

21:14 – Matt Dunn

And the Marianist Family has changed since then, and the Church has changed since then. There are some new rules and requirements, and our statutes have not been updated in that entire time. So, the international leadership team has been making revisions to the statutes. We'll be sharing those with delegates prior to the assembly so that we can discuss them and vote on them at the assembly. To me, the International Lay Assembly is a reminder that in a charismatic family that believes in the discipleship of equals, Lay Marianists are co-owners of the charism, and we have a responsibility to live the charism, nurture the charism, and share the charism with others in the name of the Marianists. Our charism is a gift to the Church, and the Church can learn from us and how we live community and live mission.

22:02 – Matt Dunn

One of my responsibilities each year is to visit the Vatican. I go every November, and I visit the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, the office at the Vatican that is over Lay associations and movements. Our typical experience when we visit them is to just give an update on what's happening with lay communities around the world, what's the experience in our countries and things like that. But since Pope Francis instituted Synodality, they're asking a lot more curious questions, and they're very curious about the Marianist Family. They're fascinated by us and the relationship that we as laity have with the other branches of the Family. It is uncommon for a lay association to not be under the purview of a religious order or a bishop. We're not. We're independent but equal. And they're fascinated by the relationship that we have with the Brothers and the Sisters, not being subservient to them. I think there's an opportunity for the Church to learn from us, and I'd like to think that we could have that effect locally as well.

23:04 – Mike Bennett

If a listener were to peek through a window or a door of the assembly, what's one thing you would hope that they would see or feel?

23:13 – Matt Dunn

I think a surprise – because people are coming from all over the world – is how we navigate language. I've been to past international assemblies, and the only thing that I could possibly compare it to that somebody might resonate with is Pentecost. There is so much joy and a family spirit, despite language and cultural barriers. We enjoy being together, and we are on the same page despite where we're coming from. And that is a wonderful model of community and a wonderful model of Church.

23:42 – Mike Bennett

I'm curious if you can finish this sentence for me. “To me, being a part of this gathering means...”

23:48 – Matt Dunn

To me, it means getting to experience a bit of heaven on earth and an experience of what the Church has the potential to be.

23:58 – Mike Bennett

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a production of the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. Check the show notes for more information about MLC-NA's assembly, as well as links to the websites for the Society of Mary, Common Bond, and the International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities.

Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts and follow us on social media @ThisIsNACMS. I'm Mike Bennett, media administrator for NACMS.